The Narrow House

By WILL PAYNE

Illustrations by George A. Faul

"Once I saw her in Costello's sitting-room, kneeling beside his chair. She was safe now."

IT was one of those incidental, tucked-in houses which one finds here and there in New York—built to utilize a left-over plot of ground. Its width could hardly have been more than a dozen feet and its depth perhaps thirty feet. On the ground floor, which was level with the street, there was a sitting-room in front, then a cubby of a dining-room, and in the rear a toy kitchen. On each of the three floors above that, there was a sitting-room in front and a bed-room in the rear, and between them a bath-room and closet, flanked by a tiny hall and a stairway so narrow that two grown persons could not have passed without squeezing.

The neighborhood—not far from Washington Square—just missed being frowsy. The next street to the west was frankly a tenement district. But my mail that winter had consisted mostly of rejected manuscripts. I told my friends I was seeking a new lodging because the hotel was too noisy; in fact, I was leaving the hotel because I could no longer afford it. Mrs. Durante, the dark, plump landlady of the narrow house, asked only forty dollars a month for the top floor, so I took it.

If quiet had been my object I couldn't possibly have done better. All day long the little house was still as a tomb. Once in a while I might catch the landlady's light footfall on the stairs, or the opening of a door. There was no servant, Mrs. Durante herself doing the housework. Such was the stillness that even a slight noise struck sharply on the nerves. Apparently no one ever came there during the day. After dinner Costello came in.

He lodged on the second floor, by what struck me as an odd arrangement—the landlady herself sleeping on the third floor. I can not recall now how or when I first became distinctly aware of him, but he must have made the advances, for that would be in his character rather than in mine.

He was around fifty, with a broad bald patch on top of his head and gray threads in his dust-colored hair. There was more gray in the darker mustache, which he wore twisted into neat, straight points, like a dandy. On each side of his face there was a parenthetical line, which he seemed to have worn into the tough flesh by laughing. He laughed often—it was never loud, but mellow, bubbling, genial.

He was a dandy about his clothes too, as far as his slender means permitted,—always brushing them, examining them attentively for grease-spots and frayed places, pressing them with his own hand. For that purpose he kept an electric flat-iron, which he exhibited to me, explaining with enthusiasm how much cheaper and better it was than going to a tailor.

He had an amusing kind of miserliness about clothes. His closet was full of garments too shabby or too far out of fashion for use, yet so nearly usable that he couldn't bring himself to give them away. There was a silk hat which bulged queerly at the top, but in a tolerable state of preservation. "That shape might come in style again, you know," he explained cannily as he tried it on. There were bright-colored waistcoats with threadbare spots, and even a long blue military cape without sleeves—having only slits through which the wearer might thrust his arms—and with a monk-like hood that nearly covered the face. It looked to me like an article from a comic opera property-room; but he had worn it somewhere—here or abroad—and treasured it against a possible day when he could appear on Fifth Avenue in it.

NATURALLY, I put Costello down as a genial, frivolous sort of person. Very likely it was my typewriter and litter of manuscript that first strongly attracted him to me, although his irrepressible sociability would have made him seek to know me, anyway. It presently transpired that he, too, wrote—with even less success than myself, for he had not achieved print. At various times, he had written two plays, several short stories, and part of a novel.

He talked to me about authorship with the utmost gravity. Of course, it came around to my reading his manuscripts. Although they were dog-eared from much handling and mailing, I have never seen their like outside a museum—all written on fine, firm paper in a hand as clear as copper-plate. He must have copied them with infinite care, for the last page was as finely written as the first and there was not the least erasure anywhere. He asked my advice about having them typewritten and sending them the rounds again; for he suspected editors and managers had been prejudiced against them because they were hand-written.

Advising at all required as much tact as I was master of, for I was certain the stuff was utterly hopeless. I then held a very low opinion of romance at its best, and this was romance about at its worst. I did go the length of saying to him, with a laugh:

"Such things as your stories deal with simply don't happen. Virtually nothing happens in this prosy world except getting a job and paying the rent and the baby having measles. The material for art lies in the thoroughly commonplace experiences that make up all but a negligible one part in a million of life. Practically speaking, romantic things happen nowhere but on a stage."

The novelette that I was then working on dealt with a street-car conductor who couldn't make up his mind whether to join the union. I had been at endless pains to get the color and details just right—talking with twenty conductors and making careful notes of the flat in which one of them lived. I was all for the most uncompromising realism then, scorning romance.

Naturally, Costello did not depend upon writing for a livelihood. He was about my height, which is an inch under six feet, and I had noticed his build as soon as I noticed anything about him—the straight back, square shoulders, tapering waist—also, a catlike quickness of motion. Going out for breakfast one Sunday morning,—the landlady having gone to mass,—I ran upon him in his tiny hall as he had stepped out of his bath.

No doubt I looked surprised. His biceps sat up like gourds, and when he took a step a great rope of muscle came out on his leg. He laughed, noting my surprised look, and patted a mighty arm, saying, "My meal ticket!" Then he told me his occupation was that of athletic instructor in a Young Men's Christian Association.

He was as genially, innocently vain of his strength and agility as of a new hat or neck-tie. One day he thrust his arm under my arm and behind me, clutching my coat in the back, and so lifted me clean off my feet, waltzing across the room with me held upright beside him like a log.

I had heard him speak Italian with the landlady, and he told me he was an old friend of the family, having known the husband long before his death. It appeared that he and Durante had traveled abroad together at one time.

His attitude toward Mrs. Durante seemed altogether brotherly—that of her dead husband's friend. She herself struck me as a quite commonplace sort of person—pleasant and intelligent, with big, sad, dark eyes and good features, but getting stout. She did up my rooms every morning in the hour that I spent at breakfast, so I saw little of her.

I HAD been in the narrow house about three weeks, working furiously at the novelette every morning from nine o'clock to one. But an electric light bulb in my front room had burned out, and about eleven o'clock one morning I ran downstairs in my slippers to tell the landlady about it.

The door to Mrs. Durante's sitting-room on the ground floor stood open. When I reached the foot of the stairs, I saw three people in there, drawn close together, in attitudes of intimate, absorbed conversation.

Mrs. Durante, in fact, was weeping. A fat old man in the garb of a priest sat beside her on the little sofa. Costello had drawn his chair so close to them, his knees almost touched them. He was bending forward, talking into their faces, low and rapidly. Costello's back was to me; but the priest saw me at once, arose hastily, stepped over, and closed the door. There was nothing for me to do but retreat upstairs, with a disagreeable feeling of having intruded.

Half an hour later Costello came up, very grave, with a line down his forehead. The Durantes had a daughter. I can't remember whether he had ever mentioned her before that morning, but if he had it was in such a way as left no impression on my mind. She was very unhappily married, it seemed. Some bad news about her had come that morning; Mrs. Durante had sent for him and the priest; hence the conference upon which I had stumbled.

This rather surprised me—the hint of a tragedy in the dull little house. And Costello was very grave about it, very thoughtful, frowning at the floor, speaking with restrained terseness, in contrast with his usual genial expansiveness. Yet the tragedy of an unhappy marriage was itself commonplace enough.

THE next scene unfolded four or five days later. I had happened to go into Costello's sitting-room on the second floor. True, I had been there several times before, and had noticed on his bureau a red morocco photograph case containing three portraits. The one on the left was that of a child, and the one on the right showed a girl just in her teens, while the middle one was of a girl near womanhood. All three faces were attractive—of the same large-eyed, straight-nosed, oval-faced type. I stepped closer, to look at them.

Costello stepped up also, regarding the photographs with me.

"My dove," he said gravely, twisting his mustache.

He seemed to mean that all three were the same person, and I looked around at him inquiringly.

"She was just six then," he explained soberly, nodding to the photograph on the left. "There she was twelve, and there sixteen." He regarded the photographs a moment longer, and repeated, "My dove"; then went over and sat down, twisting his mustache.

"Yes, I've known her since she was so high," he observed, holding his hand the height of his knee. "I fairly brought her up. She is the daughter I spoke to you about."

I recalled that he had mentioned an unhappy marriage.

"She was bound to marry him," said Costello gravely, twisting his mustache